

Bush: Ban gay marriage

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WASHINGTON — President Bush urged Congress Monday to move swiftly to outlaw same-sex marriage by amending the U.S. Constitution, saying gay unions will "undermine the family structure."

"An amendment to the Constitution is necessary because activist courts have left our nation with no other choice," Bush told a group of supporters, many of them religious advocates. "When judges insist on imposing their arbitrary will on the people, the only alternative left to the people is an amendment to the Constitution, the only law a court cannot overturn."

Bush's comments coincided with debate in the Senate on a long-shot proposal that would define marriage as a pact between men and women. A procedural vote on the measure could occur as soon as today, though observers doubt 60 senators - the number needed to keep it alive - will support the move.

Opponents assail the proposal as a political tactic aimed at energizing conservatives in a critical election year in which Republicans risk losing control of Congress.

"Stop the political pandering for this fall's election," Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said on the floor. "Let's get on and do something real."

The marriage issue is consuming precious time in a short legislative year that would be better used to expand health care, address the Iraq war and lower gas prices, Leahy said.

"Mean-spirited rhetoric does not serve this nation or our diverse population," Leahy said, adding that the issue is being "wielded like a weapon" to score political points.

Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., said, "I am very disappointed the Senate will again spend its time with a federal marriage amendment, rather than working to address the critical challenges that face our country, such as the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, global warming and the rising cost of health insurance.

Congressman Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., said, "This proposal is a blatant election-year stunt and a shameful attempt by President Bush and the Republican leadership to pander to the extreme right wing and divide our country."

"Attempting to rewrite our Constitution to deny a group of people equal rights is inherently wrong and offensive to the democratic process," Sanders said.

Sen. John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat who suffered when Republican voters flocked to polls featuring state-level gay marriage bans during the presidential election, called the latest move "pathetic."

"We're bogged down in Iraq with troops killed and maimed every day, we've got record gas prices here at home, and the Senate has decided the most important thing to do is debate a doomed, trumped up, divisive, ideological constitutional amendment," Kerry said in a statement. "What a disgrace."

Conservative Republicans worry that Massachusetts' gay marriage law could be used as legal precedent to undermine a federal law defining marriage as between a man and a woman, the Marriage Protection Act.

Bush said Congress should approve the amendment with a two-thirds vote - the minimum needed - so state legislatures can have a chance to vote on the measure. Three-fourths of legislatures would need to approve the measure to pass.

The president, facing critics' descriptions of the amendment as unvarnished bigotry, sought to strike a tender

tone.

"As this debate goes forward, every American deserves to be treated with tolerance and respect and dignity," Bush said. "And all of us have a duty to conduct this discussion with civility and decency toward one another."